

The Judgment. (Judgment Without Trial? #1) Summary of our discussion

At the beginning of *The Judgment*, we find Georg Bendemann, who has just finished a letter to his friend in Russia, reliving once more the agonizing decision to write the letter in the first place. The decision had not been easy. Like many of Kafka's characters, Georg Bendemann is obsessed with the idea of analysis, with the painstaking exploration of all sides of a given issue. "What could one write to such a man without hurting him?" had been the question. "On the other hand, by writing only casual gossip or not at all one would doubtless increase the friends isolation" had been the counter-argument. What follows now is an exercise in looking at alternatives that spawn new alternatives that leaves the reader dazzled. Each conclusion is in turn explored to its possible opposite implications, which are in turn qualified, which leads to more questions followed by more partial conclusions plus qualifications thereof. The process could continue *ad infinitum*, in fact, has gone on for years--we are merely presented with a condensed version of it.

The process recounted presents Georg Bendemann as a person who is all thought and no opinion. He is left with the startling conclusion that, instead of making the decision easier, his analysis makes it impossible. He has built an inverted pyramid of possibilities the upper and outer reaches of which can no longer be surveyed from his position at the base. (Comment on the Socratic method?) Is it, therefore, to be interpreted as a sign of increasing maturity and independence, a process paralleled by the father's gradual decline, that the young man discontinues an analysis which leads only to further analysis, thereby turning the simple everyday task of writing a letter into a problem of gigantic proportions? For the decision to write the letter, after all, and to include the news he had meant to impart to his friend, is not at all the result of the ponderous mental activity that was described--but is an expression simply of self-affirmation. Thoughtfulness leads to paralysis, i.e. nowhere; Georg Bendemann decides to cut the knot and let the chips fall where they may (you liked the mixed metaphor).

Georg Bendemann's long period of indecision is, of course, prompted by more than altruistic concern over his friend's feelings, genuine as they may have been, or else he would realize that his excessive consideration for his friend's well-being is as ineffective as the total lack of it; both result in the friend's neglect.

A more important reason for the young man's endless series of considerations is his need to exercise control: control over himself, control over the result of his actions, control over his environment. "A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch closely every least movement lest he be surprised by any indirect attack, a pounce from behind or above." This is one of the key sentences of the story and goes a long way to explain the relationship between father and son. As soon as the father manages to shake Georg's self-control and composure, he has gained the upper hand.

Remember Georg's reaction when he realized that his father is no longer of sound and healthy mind: "Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?" the father asks. "Georg rose in embarrassment" the story continues and then Georg speaks: "Never mind my friends ... I'll close [the business] down ... We'll have to make a change ... a radical change ... No, father ... I'll get the doctor ... We'll change your room ... I'll move in here ... I'll put you to bed ... I'm sure ... I'll help you ... You'll see I can do it." Half a page of reassurances and determinations, studded with the personal pronoun "I-we." Georg appears to be firmly in control of the encounter, particularly after he has put the father to bed and after he has witnessed what must appear to him the ultimate manifestation of the father's senility: as George carries him in his arms the father plays with the son's watch-chain.

We remember what happens next. The father becomes once more his former self, probably for the last time, delivers a scathing verbal attack, and sentences his son to death by drowning. "Georg felt swept from the room," he rushes downstairs, across the street, over the railing, into the river.

What constitutes the father's authority? On what evidence is his judgment based? The father is senile; the narrator takes great care not to invest him with any objective qualities that would justify his

authoritarian stance. If he is not senile, you will have to admit that he is a calculating monster and all the more devoid of any objective authority. What, then, is authority in this case? Let me suggest an answer as primitive as, I believe, Kafka here intended it to be: authority is a power you grant to someone else. (Obedience, freedom, religious and secular. See my essay: "[Luther on Authority](#), Law and Order"). What if Georg laughed in the old man's face? What if we laughed at the Hitlers and Stalins, or any oppressive system? (We do, but secretly; the political joke told as you look over your shoulder has a therapeutic effect, but it does not liberate you physically).

The father sums up the evidence against his son: "You were an innocent child, yet, at the same time a real devil." And it is on the basis of the second half of the statement that the sentence is pronounced. In a time that has rediscovered the conflict between the generations, we have no difficulty understanding what is meant by the contradictory statement above. (Uranos-Kronos-Zeus; Abraham-Isaac; Jehovah-Jesus; the Grand Inquisitor's comment in Don Carlos/Don Carlo; Hildebrandslied; Oedipus-Laios. Boris Godounov, the opposite!) The son is a threat. However, the physical law that there can be no vacuum applies to the father-son relationship as well: as the father decreases the son increases; as the father withdraws from the business, the son increasingly takes over and becomes a successful merchant himself. What, to the father, appears as aggression and threat, is, from the perspective of the son, the natural consequence of time. Depending on one's perspective, the son's very concern is either an expression of filial affection or of the desire to take charge.

Like the father, the son feels the need to be on guard to protect his position. While the father need merely rise to his imposing height, thereby recalling in his son all the awe he had inspired during Georg's childhood--the son has chosen the weapon of personal watchfulness, lest the gains obtained through the passage of time and sheer good fortune be lost through carelessness. "A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch closely every last movement lest he be surprised ..." However, the total consciousness Georg considers necessary to retain control is humanly impossible. (Kleist: that form of perfection we call grace is possible only where there is pure matter, pure instinct, total lack of self-consciousness or where the opposite is true: pure spirit, pure intellect, total consciousness. Man, still on his way around the world, is somewhere in between and will remain there, for the world is, presumably, infinite.)

In an unguarded moment Georg calls his father "*Komödiant*," actor, meaning "you have tricked me," and "realized at once the harm he had done and bit his tongue, too late, till the pain made his knees give." A momentary loss of self-control, a careless word implying admission that he underestimated his father--and he never regains his composure. On the contrary, the natural process we spoke about is now reversed; the son's lapse becomes the father's strength, increasingly so until the original father-son, father-child relationship is reestablished and *Georg gehorcht aufs Wort*, he obeys instantly and literally.

We suggested the following conclusion: Georg Bendemann lacks the tools to attain what we called total control: self-control, control over the effect of one's actions, control of one's environment. The painstaking analysis of the possible effect of his actions lead only to more analysis and ultimately, would lead to paralysis. Like his father, later, in his moment of power, he abandons the intellectual process and acts spontaneously (Hamlet). The other, related, protective device, total consciousness, perennial watchfulness, is humanly impossible. What he needs to maintain his status is simply not available to him.